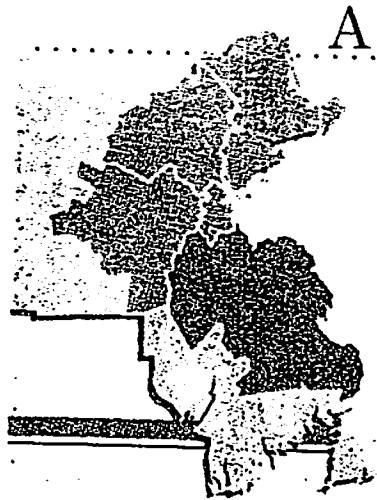


SOUTH



It's 'all aboard' new rail service

MBTA: Ridership above projections on the Old Colony

By Robert Preer
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The second rush-hour train of the afternoon on the Middleborough branch of the Old Colony Railroad left Boston's South Station at 4:45 one day last week and pulled into the downtown Brockton station at 5:24, right on schedule.

Sean Garrity, a Brockton resident who lives a mile from the station, was among the roughly two dozen passengers who disembarked.

"I like it" said Garrity, as he strode down the station exit ramp carrying his briefcase. "I work in the Back Bay. I used to drive. It took an hour and 20 minutes every day. What a drag that was."

The new Old Colony Railroad is proving to be a hit with commuters. After less than two months of full operation, ridership on both the Kingston and Middleborough branches has exceeded the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's projections for the year 2000.

The Kingston line is carrying about 6,100 passengers each weekday, while the Middleborough line's weekday average is 5,200. Before the railroad reopened last fall, state transportation officials had projected ridership to climb gradually to 5,000 on each line over two years.

South suburban residents also are taking the train to Boston on weekends. The average combined Saturday and Sunday ridership now is 5,200 on the Kingston line and 4,150 on the Lakeville branch.

"Ridership has skyrocketed," said MBTA spokeswoman Erin Harrington. "We didn't expect these numbers. It's amazing."

To keep up with rising demand, the MBTA plans to add four new double-decker coaches later this month. These will be the Old Colony line's first split-level cars, which are used on the MBTA's other heavily used routes.

"Commuters are enthusiastic," said Kingston state Representative Thomas J. O'Brien, whose district includes both the Kingston and Middleborough terminals. "For some, it is a godsend."

Brockton Mayor John T. Yunits Jr. said, "I've ridden the trains and talked to people. They say it has

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added two hours to their day. It has been a blessing for those people."

However, the return of the railroad, which had been closed for 38 years has not been trouble-free. Parking and traffic snarls have occurred at some stations, and safety remains a concern at the railroad crossings, although no serious incidents have occurred so far.

Private bus companies also have been hurt by competition from the government-owned railroad, which cost the MBTA \$537 million to build and is Massachusetts's second most expensive transportation project after Boston's Big Dig.

George Anzuoni, president of the Plymouth & Brockton Street Railway bus company, estimated ridership has dropped 10 to 15 percent since the trains started running at full service late last year. The bus company has abandoned or consolidated two or three runs, he said.

In the first weeks of operation, Old Colony trains missed several morning runs, leaving commuters stranded at stations for a half-hour or more. The problem was blamed on a shortage of engineers for Amtrak, which operates the railroad for the MBTA.

"I don't think anything like that has happened in a long time," said MBTA spokesman Joe Pesaturo. "With anything new there are kinks."

Most of the difficulties with the new railroad have been problems associated with success. So many people have been riding the trains that parking spaces at the stations are becoming scarce.

The parking lot at the Middleborough station, which straddles the Middleborough-Lakeville town line, has been filled to capacity several times. The Halifax station also is close to capacity, according to state Representative O'Brien.

State Senator Therese Murray (D-Plymouth) said she believes the MBTA should start planning to expand the Kingston station and also consider adding a second exit.

The Kingston station at first was plagued with evening traffic jams, although installation of a traffic light and a new turning lane on the exit road have eased those problems, according to O'Brien.

Officials also continue to worry about the risk of accidents involving a train and a motorist or pedestrian at the 54 grade crossings on the two lines.

"Safety in general along the line we are satisfied with, but we do have a problem with grade crossings," said Kingston Fire Chief Jon H. Al-

berghini.

Video cameras installed at crossings on Route 3A in downtown Kingston and Route 36 in Halifax have recorded motorists going around descending gates and stopping too close to the tracks. One car was witnessed wedged between a closed gate and a speeding train.

A special task force made up of MBTA, state, and local officials is studying a number of possible remedies, including longer gates, better lighting, and traffic signals. The committee also is considering the wisdom of installing so-called "quad gates," which when lowered block access to the tracks but which also can trap a driver caught in the middle who doesn't realize the gates will break if he drives through them.

O'Brien, a member of the task force, said recommendations will be issued in the spring, with implementation scheduled for the summer.

The MBTA estimates that the Old Colony trains are removing 6,600 cars a day from the road - a small fraction of the 200,000 plus vehicles that now travel routes 3 and 24.

But while there has been no observable decrease in highway congestion, the trains have reduced the jam at the two Route 3 Red Line rapid transit parking garages.

The Braintree Red Line garage, which used to fill up between 7:30 and 8 a.m., now does not reach capacity until after 9:30 a.m., according to MBTA spokesman Pesaturo. The Quincy Adams garage, which used to become full between 8 a.m. and 8:30, now usually does not fill up until 11, he said.

The success of the trains also has renewed fears among local officials and planners that the railroad will create a surge in home construction and an influx of new residents that semirural towns will not be able to accommodate.

"We've seen a slight increase in the number of building permits," said Lakeville Selectman Chawner Hurd. "It is not a cause for great alarm, but it does get you thinking."

The three regional planning agencies that serve southeastern Massachusetts recently formed a 40-person task force on how cope with the expected growth of the area, which is already the fastest growing region in Massachusetts. The task force is scheduled to hold its first meeting this week.

Meanwhile, the Plymouth County Development Council, an organization that promotes economic growth in the region, released a brief report last week pointing out the railroad's benefits to the region.

The development council report, prepared by Bridgewater State Col-

lege geography professor Glenn R. Miller, states that the railroad will mean rising land values, more jobs, and concentrated development near the stations.

The popularity of the Old Colony line has boosted the hopes of supporters of two other rail lines proposed for the region south of Boston - the Greenbush branch of the Old Colony line, which would run along the coast to Scituate, and the Fall River-New Bedford extension, which would link those two cities and Taunton to Boston by commuter rail.

"I've always felt that once the other two lines were up and running, it would demonstrate to people in the Greenbush corridor that Greenbush would be successful," said state Representative Frank M. Hynes, a Marshfield Democrat and Greenbush supporter.

Hynes stressed, though, that he has seen no big political push to re-

open Greenbush, which has experienced repeated delays because of regulatory and legal challenges from opponents.

While reopening the Middleborough and Kingston lines was mostly free of controversy, the Greenbush line, which crosses more than 40 streets at grade level and goes through a historic district in Hingham, has triggered strong opposition.

Freight service continued on the Kingston and Middleborough lines after the commuter railroad closed in 1959, but all service was halted on the Greenbush line.

The MBTA has not yet chosen a route for the Fall River-New Bedford line, which could be built as an extension of either the Old Colony, the Attleboro, or the Stoughton lines. All three possible routes have sparked opposition from people who live near the proposed lines.